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Operational activities of the United Nations for international development cooperation: follow-up to policy recommendations of the General Assembly and the Council

Operational activities of the United Nations for international development cooperation

Assessment of the lessons learned by United Nations organizations from evaluation activities at the field level

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report responds to paragraph 56 of General Assembly resolution 56/201, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to carry out an impartial and independent assessment of the extent to which the United Nations funds, programmes and agencies at the field level learn lessons from their evaluations, and to formulate proposals on how to improve the feedback mechanisms at the field level, and requested the Secretary-General to report to the Economic and Social Council at its 2003 substantive session on this matter. After analysing the factors that determine the demand and the supply for these lessons learned as they become manifested at the country level, the report provides an assessment of how the United Nations system makes use of available evaluations at the country level, on the basis of information made available by evaluation offices and relevant country-level evidence, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of two processes: how the system identifies lessons to be learned at the country level and how the system disseminates these lessons, once identified. After reaching conclusions on the basis of analysis of the current practice in different parts of the system, the report suggests a few recommendations to the Council on how to enhance the evaluation function and its use at the country level, through measures that regard the individual organization or collaboration among the parts of the United Nations system, as a means of increasing the effectiveness of United Nations development cooperation.

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I. Background and context

1. The present report responds to paragraph 56 of General Assembly resolution 56/201, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to carry out an impartial and independent assessment of the extent to which the United Nations funds, programmes and agencies at the field level learn lessons from their evaluations and to formulate proposals on how to improve the feedback mechanisms at the field level, and requested the Secretary-General to report to the Economic and Social Council at its 2003 substantive session in that regard. The General Assembly's concern stemmed at least partly from the conclusions of the Secretary-General's reports to the 1998 and 2001 triennial comprehensive policy reviews. Both reports noted weaknesses in the institutional memory at the field level.[1]

2. Improved and more effective development cooperation requires continuous updating of knowledge of the development process and greater awareness of the outcomes of past development cooperation activities that took place in the country or other relevant situations. All United Nations organizations involved in country-level activities need a capacity to retain lessons gained from past experience, enhance their institutional memory and analyse, assess and understand the content and directions of development dynamics in order to optimize the impact of their interventions.

3. Linkages between the evaluation function of each agency and improvements in its effectiveness, however, cannot always be assumed. Evaluation activities exert a positive influence at the country level only when evaluation is a real source of good judgement, is timely, is substantively relevant in development terms, and when its cost is justified and its outcomes are actually used by those who can benefit from them.

4. How does the effectiveness of United Nations development cooperation activities at the country level depend on the system's capacity to build on past activities and their performance, including failures? By learning from the past, system organizations can reorient the design of their operations, adjust their implementation modalities and assess the validity of their geographical, functional and strategic priorities, in order to reach the ultimate result of better servicing the beneficiaries of United Nations development support.

5. In the international development community there has been increased recognition that most United Nations entities are knowledge organizations and that there is potential, as yet unrealized, to leverage that knowledge and use it more wisely and effectively. A number of United Nations organizations have been making systematic efforts to become "learning organizations", echoing an approach increasingly being adopted in civil society and the private sector, and seek to improve their management of the knowledge that they possess.

6. This coincides with an increasing interest in evaluation as a source of lessons, as well as an instrument of accountability. Improving use of the knowledge and wisdom to be gleaned from evaluations is only one aspect of this larger process, which endeavours to make use of the lessons learned through a variety of activities other than evaluation.[2]

7. Improving knowledge management is a major and ongoing key task for any individual United Nations entity that undertakes it. Given the nature of their work,

the organizations cannot easily learn clear lessons from their own activities. This task becomes even more difficult when dealing with collective learning by the United Nations system at the country level. In fact, the system's cooperation with Member States, whether in a convening, norm setting, advocacy or operational role, is not always amenable to cost-benefit analysis, making it sometimes difficult to provide precise answers to questions about the performance of the United Nations system.

8. Lessons can be obtained from sources other than evaluation, such as monitoring, technical appraisals, reviews and audits. Guidance manuals are often used as a disseminating device to turn past experience into wisdom for future action at the country level. Training activities, including workshops, retreats, the establishment of networks and other exchanges of experience, the use of agency or inter-agency web sites or discussion forums, are all-important means of sharing lessons.

9. The approach adopted in preparing the present report involved the fullest participation of the United Nations system in searching for data, carrying out analysis and generating proposals for improvements. The views of each organization as to their current practices with regard to lesson learning from evaluation and application of the results, as well as proposals for improving learning at the field level were sought and taken into account.

10. In order to facilitate the consultation process with the United Nations system, an ad hoc inter-agency task force on lessons learned from evaluation activities was established under the Inter-Agency Working Group on Evaluation. Exchanges with other organizations of the system not directly involved in the ad hoc inter-agency task force were also undertaken. The inputs of all these sources have been drawn upon. Information and analysis was sought from the United Nations country teams in Bolivia, Bangladesh, China, Ethiopia and the Philippines. This has helped give greater depth to the picture of current practices provided by the responses received from the United Nations system. An independent consultant reviewed the data coming from the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and the suggestions emanating from the ad hoc inter-agency task force. He also provided recommendations, which were used as an input to the present report, on how the United Nations system could best improve feedback and lesson learning at the field level.

11. The volume of evidence available within the system and the variety of relevant information that could be found within each organization and/or within each country-level situation, suggested to the ad hoc task force that the present report should only be a first step. Reflection on this subject should continue in the months ahead in the context of the 2004 Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review and its expected follow-up, and should continue to rely on collaboration with the Inter-Agency Working Group on Evaluation.

II. Demand for and supply of lessons from evaluation

12. Demand for lessons learned from evaluation is expressed by many entities: the headquarters of United Nations system organizations, their country-level officers, recipient countries (both at the governmental and non-governmental levels), donors and other external partners. The demand is a function of the intended use of lessons

learned and, at the country level, is mainly to assist both national authorities and United Nations system managers in making decisions about designing or approving new development initiatives, at the project, programme, sector, system and national levels, or about renewing or extending past activities. The demand has also been driven by the need to demonstrate results achieved.

13. The demand for lessons from evaluation has been changing as the content and context of operational activities have been evolving. The focus of evaluations has shifted along a spectrum of concerns, away from input-oriented accountability towards strategic and policy issues and questions of development success. Local managers, both national and United Nations, need guidance about their programme strategies and policies, their consistency and coordination and their contribution to global goals and to frameworks such as Sector Wide Approaches or the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). This guidance may come from many sources, including from the findings of evaluations.

14. Recently, the United Nations Millennium Declaration has been providing a comprehensive framework of development priorities for developing countries and the United Nations system, for which financial resources must be mobilized and human resources need to be assigned. This affects the demand for lessons learned. The Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed goals provide an organizing principle, determining the most important issues for which lessons and learning are needed.

15. The demand for lessons from evaluation is also affected by the differences in what the field and headquarters, and what the United Nations system and external stakeholders expect from evaluations. United Nations country teams naturally perceive evaluations that are functionally linked to country-level plans and programmes as more relevant to their decision-making processes than evaluations that go beyond country concerns. The latter are often perceived as external to managers, who prefer either self-evaluations or strongly participatory evaluations. A perception of an evaluation as external to the work of local managers tends to limit the local appreciation of its value. Lessons of evaluations sought by managers are probably more easily absorbed than those of evaluations that are carried out in response to other stimuli. On the other hand, many past evaluations of projects or groupings of projects, while dealing with substantive and managerial issues that were of immediate concern to managers at the field level, often had only limited application beyond the immediate focus of the project(s).

16. The supply of lessons is also evolving. There is a variety of information that can be retrieved from evaluations depending on their focus. The project used to be the basic unit for delivery of United Nations operational activities and to be the fundamental organizational arrangement that defined objectives and resources. Lessons learned exclusively from such project contexts were necessarily limited. The larger issues of development policy could only rarely be addressed. More recently, the programme approach and a greater integration into the sectoral plans and national frameworks or systems of the country concerned have become the norm.[3] This makes it easier to make observations and draw lessons about larger topics.

17. The need to monitor the implementation of the Millennium Declaration also affects the supply of lessons learned, since United Nations specialized agencies are expected to collect data and analyse them in relation to the indicators that have been

developed to monitor progress towards the attainment of the Millennium Goals. Specialized agencies are often the source best placed to make qualitative judgements about these indicators, and should be the most appropriate suppliers of lessons learned that are relevant to monitoring the development achievements summarized in the Millennium Goals. Their inputs should contribute to a comprehensive lesson learning strategy for the United Nations system.

18. Any good evaluation system will handle these competing claims (demand) for evaluation results at different levels and compare them with the available supply, realizing that evaluation ultimately has to satisfy the requirements of accountability, better programme management and lesson learning. To accomplish these tasks, the United Nations organizations should be enabled to use a wide array of evaluation approaches appropriate to each task, it being recognized that evaluation is a flexible tool that adjusts to different purposes and is not a ritual. Those in charge of the evaluation function need to consider the requirements of different users, including managers of development cooperation activities and other stakeholders, who call for qualitative and quantitative information and analysis, whether at the country, regional or global level, and to establish on that basis priority areas to be addressed and select approaches suitable to each area. The needs of field-level managers, of their national colleagues and the wider needs of the international development community need to be balanced in defining the appropriate evaluation strategy and the combination of analysis and information required.

19. These issues have been the subject of reflection on the part of major contributors to development cooperation activities, in particular bilateral agencies, which have also devoted considerable attention to lesson learning and feedback. A workshop on evaluation feedback for effective learning and accountability, organized by the DAC/OECD in Tokyo in 2000, noted that some of the key challenges facing evaluation departments included:

- Resolving the contradictions between the dual roles of evaluation feedback — learning and accountability;
- Responding to the shift from project evaluations to the new generation of broader based evaluations focusing on themes or sectors;
- Further improving dissemination strategies;
- Finding better ways of institutionalizing lesson learning;
- Reinforcing the reputation of evaluation units as a source of useful learning;
- Increasing participation and stakeholder involvement in evaluations, without sacrificing core evaluation principles;
- Responding to the growing problem of information overload.

The main opportunities identified were:

- Harnessing the Internet as a means of improving transparency and facilitating lesson learning within and between agencies;
- Tapping into the new organizational management agendas of "knowledge management" and "managing for results" to enhance learning and accountability;

Responding to the wider challenge presented to development agencies by the international development goals.

20. The above considerations focus on management and accountability issues, which affect the efficiency and effectiveness of development cooperation activities and apply to all forms of international development support. The evaluation of United Nations operational activities, however, has a few complex features that require special consideration, because of the role of the United Nations as an advocate and as a catalyst of developing countries' efforts to pursue globally or regionally agreed goals. Evaluation of the effectiveness of United Nations system activities should be able to identify both lessons and good practices that may assist Member States in pursuing policies or programmes that move towards those goals and policies or programmes that have a direct bearing on the immediate impact of operational activities.

III How does a system like that of the United Nations learn lessons?

21. In the present report a distinction is drawn between evaluation findings and recommendations on the one hand and lessons learned on the other, although in practice this distinction may be blurred. Some evaluation experts have in fact argued that lesson learning is synonymous with best practices and that neither is a very operational term. "High quality lessons learned represent principles extrapolated from multiple sources and independently triangulated to increase transferability as cumulative knowledge or working hypotheses that can be adapted and applied to new situations. One of the challenges facing the profession of evaluation going forward will be to bring some rigour to these popular notions of 'lessons learned' and 'best practices'."[4]

22. To differentiate between the outcomes of evaluations and lessons learned, this report takes it that the findings and recommendations of an evaluation deal with the specific issues the evaluators were asked to address, while lessons learned represent judgements or generalizations about issues that go beyond the limits of the topic of a single evaluation. Lessons can be inferred from a single evaluation, but more likely from a group of evaluations or from evaluation of a larger entity such as a sector(s) or a programme(s). The wider the ambitions of the programme or project, the greater the scope for generalizations to be drawn from them.

23. A wide variety of material is presented by different parts of the United Nations system as lessons learned. Its quality and practical relevance also varies.[5] There are no agreed criteria for differentiating good lessons from less worthy ones or for establishing a strategy for producing the former and discarding the latter. For operational activities, one criterion could be the extent to which a lesson advances the "shared" understanding of key actors, either with regard to an issue or their ability to deal with it.

24. Different audiences learn lessons in different forms. There are several audiences at the country level: (a) the United Nations system itself; (b) its national partners in government and in civil society; (c) the country's international partners — bilateral donors, other multilateral organizations and international non-governmental organizations; and (d) the direct beneficiaries of the development

support initiatives, if they are not included in the previous categories. These different audiences may have different capacities to appreciate and absorb lessons. The United Nations system and the country's partners should be capable of taking advantage of all the facilities of the information society. For the country itself, depending on where it is situated relative to the digital divide, this capability may not necessarily be adequate, in terms of both learning and, more importantly, diffusing or having access to lessons. Such diversity of audiences and their receptivity needs to be reflected carefully in the design and operation of the evaluation systems applied to United Nations development cooperation activities.

25. There are procedural changes which can promote lesson learning at the field level. For example, the introduction of UNDAF in the first reform programme of the Secretary-General gave impetus to collective learning. In isolated instances, joint midterm programme reviews carried out by United Nations country teams in the 1990s promoted some synergy and system learning in the countries concerned. But until the introduction of UNDAF and then the Millennium Goals, there were not enough generally accepted common goals and common tasks around which country teams could coalesce their learning and knowledge sharing efforts. Mechanisms such as joint midterm reviews and terminal evaluations of UNDAF[6] and country programmes should promote substantive lesson learning at the field level, both by the United Nations system and the Governments and societies they support, since the Millennium Goals and other similar goals provide a solid and consistent framework of priorities.

26. Another example of procedural change would be joint evaluation planning, undertaken in consultation with the relevant national authorities, which would address the most pressing needs for information and would provide valuable insight as to how best to obtain that information, whether by relying on monitoring, self-evaluation or more independent evaluation. Similarly, the work to measure achievements in terms of Millennium Goals can also be the foundation for new joint evaluation plans.

27. How much does it cost to learn lessons from evaluations? What share of evaluation resources is devoted to converting evaluation results into lessons learned? And how effectively are these resources used in the United Nations system? The average total direct costs of evaluation activities for a sample of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries is 0.22 per cent of their budget.[7] There is no readily available breakdown for most United Nations entities of how much of their evaluation budgets is devoted to extracting lessons and how much is spent on disseminating them. Furthermore, there is little evidence that the cost of generating lessons has been analysed or that any estimate of the resulting benefits has been made, either for the countries concerned or for United Nations organizations. At a time when concern is being focused on achieving the Millennium Goals and other similar goals, and when the United Nations system should be sharing its experience on how to pursue them in the most cost-effective way, more attention to the economics of lesson learning may be appropriate, although non-financial considerations should also be factored in.

IV. Assessment of current practices

28. Wide differences in evaluation capacities, policies and practices across the United Nations funds, programmes and agencies reflect the diverse set of tasks to which they are mandated to respond. From the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to the World Intellectual Property Organization and the World Tourism Organization, United Nations organizations have very different needs and mechanisms for using evaluation as a formal means of developing lessons learned.

29. A review of prevailing practices within the United Nations system reveals the following emerging characteristics of how evaluation is used to generate lessons learned at the country level.

(a) Most organizations (with the exception of the smaller specialized agencies) have a formal process which identifies the need for and carries out evaluations at the project, programme and thematic levels.

(b) Many organizations are making efforts to decentralize the process of planning and implementing project evaluations. As a result, field staff may exert considerable influence in the identification of which projects will be evaluated. The information provided, however, does not show whether there is an increasing trend towards decentralization, although there is a stated intent to decentralize the evaluation functions in many United Nations organizations. Where authority for project evaluation is decentralized, the larger organizations also provide guidance in the form of guidelines, procedural manuals and technical support from a centralized evaluation unit.

(c) In some organizations the demand for evaluation by field staff is increasing. The demand for project (and sometimes programme) evaluation studies is one measure of the relevance and utility of the evaluation function. The quality and rigour of project evaluations, however, vary significantly across agencies and countries. Therefore, raw numbers of project evaluations commissioned may not provide an accurate gauge of either demand for evaluation or performance of the evaluation function and require closer examination.

(d) Despite the common practice of decentralizing project (and sometimes programme) evaluations, almost all United Nations organizations have concentrated their small cadre of professional evaluation staff at the headquarters level, with very few professional evaluators in regional or country office positions.

(e) Country programme evaluations are more likely to be scheduled and managed by headquarters evaluation units in accordance with the country programme planning and implementation cycle, although they require strong involvement of field staff. As organizations (for example the World Food Programme) establish enhanced country programme planning processes, they tend to place more emphasis on evaluation of country programmes and country strategies.

(f) Similarly, thematic evaluations in such areas as gender equality, poverty alleviation or aid coordination are most often scheduled and managed by headquarters evaluation units in response to demands from either executive management or the organization's governing body.

(g) Some United Nations entities have also been undertaking policy and strategy evaluations. These are designed and managed by headquarters units, and may also engage independent consultants and experts. These units are also responsible for the dissemination of the results.

(h) Most organizations are making use of national consultants from developing countries to carry out evaluations and are making efforts to expand and diversify national evaluation capacity. These efforts are sometimes assisted by the development of local professional associations for evaluators.

(i) Many organizations are placing increasing emphasis on self-evaluation by project and programme staff, although this gives rise to concerns about ensuring the quality of evaluation work and possible problems in ensuring accountability. Self-evaluation is not new to the United Nations system and is not being advanced as the sole methodology or approach for evaluation at the country level. It can be combined with external evaluations.[8] Agencies are placing greater emphasis on self-evaluation as one of the key tools available for evaluation at country level, in the framework of efforts to increase the participation of field staff in evaluation work.

(j) Similarly, many organizations are placing increasing priority on the use of participatory evaluation methods, so that key stakeholders, including beneficiaries, have more of a sense of ownership of evaluation results (and are more likely to implement findings).[9]

(k) There is a significant move among several United Nations system organizations and many other donor agencies to focus on results-based management, which is going to affect the role of evaluation activities as a means to assess the achievement of results.[10]

(l) There is very little reported evaluation activity by the United Nations system as a whole at the country level. Some agency evaluations (e.g. in the case of UNDP and UNICEF) are fed into system-wide processes such as the common country assessment and UNDAF, but the reported level of joint evaluation work for these processes remains low, although there is an opportunity to collaborate on the assessment of UNDAF outcomes. Inter-agency cooperation on evaluation can be promoted through such channels as the Inter-Agency Working Group on Evaluation. The recent introduction by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) of instruments such as the UNDAF results matrix, the UNDAF monitoring and evaluation plan and the UNDAF final evaluations show possible directions for progress.[11]

(m) There are examples of United Nations organizations participating in multi-agency reviews and evaluative mechanisms such as annual review missions associated with sector-wide approaches (SWAPs), often coordinated by the World Bank and the national Government, with the involvement of the appropriate regional development bank, the most active bilateral agencies and selected participating United Nations agencies.[12]

V. Identifying lessons learned from evaluations: strengths and weaknesses

30. Some, but by no means all, United Nations organizations invest in documenting and synthesizing lessons learned from evaluations carried out at the project, programme and thematic levels. Nonetheless, this remains an area of weakness. Agency evaluation units report that not enough efforts are invested in it.

31. This problem is also linked to the volume of agency-specific evaluations undertaken at the country level, which is considerable and includes hundreds of projects that are evaluated annually, each supplemented by dozens of country programme evaluations and a significant number of thematic reviews and evaluations. Such a high volume of activity explains why there is such a large stock of under-examined and under-exploited material available in the evaluation reports.

32. There is limited capacity to identify lessons learned and this is a major cause of the limited institutional memory of the United Nations system at the field level. A few studies conducted on the overall effectiveness of the system at the country level[13] confirm the inadequacy of its institutional memory of past lessons. A consultation with the country team of Bolivia confirms this concern, as reflected in the findings of an evaluation conducted by that country team on inter-agency coordination (see box 1).

Box 1
Institutional memory at the country level

"Among the challenges we have to mention are coordination which is a time consuming and not very effective process. There is also little institutional memory, which makes the sustainability of work in common difficult".

From "The experience of interagency coordination in Bolivia" United Nations Country Team, La Paz 2002, p. 22. (Unofficial translation)

Strengths of lesson learning processes

33. In spite of these inadequacies, the current practice of learning lessons from evaluations shows some considerable strengths. The potential benefits should not be neglected, since most organizations have set up, in a reasonably comprehensive way, evaluation processes, which allow for coverage, over time, of the bulk of their activities through project, programme and thematic evaluations, whether they are undertaken as formative evaluations, mid-term evaluations or, less often, as ex post facto evaluations. There is a significant and growing body of information, which might be expected to give rise to lessons learned at country level that can be generalized.

34. Strengths of current evaluation practice in terms of lesson learning include:

(i) Evaluation is often decentralized and linked to demand from local managers and country offices (for project evaluations) and from headquarters

managers and governing bodies (for country programme evaluations and thematic studies);

(ii) Current practice often relies on external evaluators or mixed teams of external and internal evaluators in an effort to preserve independence and ensure accountability;

(iii) Increasing emphasis is being placed on the use of local evaluators;

(iv) Evaluations are participatory, or at least consultative, allowing for inputs by key stakeholders, including project and programme beneficiaries; this increases national ownership of results;

(v) Considerable efforts are being made by headquarters evaluation units to develop and update manuals, guidelines, tools and instruments, and to produce generic terms of reference, as a means of ensuring the quality of the evaluation process, although the added value of these efforts has not yet been assessed;

(vi) A small number of United Nations organizations use evaluation lessons learned in the preparation of CCAs and UNDAFs and will make use of them in the collective evaluation of UNDAF outcomes.

Weaknesses of processes for identifying lessons

35. There are some important weaknesses in the way in which United Nations system organizations generate lessons learned from their own evaluations:

(i) Most organizations rely on a very small staff of headquarters-based professionals to plan, manage, support and synthesize the results of their evaluation activities, thus contributing to the under-utilization of lessons learned.

(ii) There is a lack of evaluation capacity at the country level. Although headquarters may support field staff with manuals and guidelines for project and programme evaluation, which may be revised often, these support tools may not be well used at the country level, either because of their inadequacy or because training and other forms of required support are not provided.[14]

(iii) Little time and effort is devoted to the process of documenting and synthesizing lessons learned from evaluations at the country level. Even if a given evaluation produces an important lesson for future projects and programmes, that lesson will often not be documented, collated with other lessons and communicated to other parts of the organization.

(iv) The process used to incorporate lessons learned from evaluations in training courses and other corporate learning mechanisms (such as interactive and web-based learning modules) is very lengthy and often requires changes in formal management policies and practices.

(v) Evaluation results are not well disseminated across projects, offices and organizational units — especially when those units are organized on geographic lines or have a different thematic focus.

(vi) There is still a view, reported by field office staff in some organizations, that the bulk of evaluation activity (despite efforts to decentralize) is imposed

by headquarters units on country offices and represents a distraction from their ongoing and high priority policy and programme work.

(vii) While organizational evaluation policy and practice increasingly recognize the relevance of country programme processes and the need for evaluation at the country programme level, the vast majority of this effort is confined to specific agencies. There is not enough recognition (with some exceptions) of the need for evaluations to address significant development policy issues and to develop system-wide lessons learning at the country level.

36. The weaknesses point to two challenges:

(a) How to develop a culture of evaluation at the country office level so that evaluation efforts are valued as a means of improving effectiveness and lessons are learned and retained?

(b) How to develop evaluation approaches and methods which are efficient and timely and provide perceived value added at the field level for both country offices and Governments?

VI. Disseminating lessons learned

37. Most of the organizations reviewed have at least some elements of a planned process for communicating and disseminating lessons learned from evaluations to potential users at the country office, headquarters and, occasionally, global community level.

38. The reported weakness in identifying, documenting and synthesizing lessons learned implies that communication strategies begin with a considerable handicap. Without a systematic effort to address this problem, any attempt to generalize good practices to other projects, programmes and thematic areas through improved dissemination will fail.

39. Most organizations reviewed highlight the strong link between lessons learned and best practices. Many see the main function of lesson learning activities as the dissemination of identified best practices across projects, programmes and organizational units at both the country office and headquarters levels. This interpretation may limit effectiveness in developing lessons from evaluations since the identification of best practices may entail very difficult methodological problems. How can it be determined that one lesson is "better" than another? There are no general criteria to apply. No optimization technique can be easily applied in such a pragmatic context. This is why some agencies started preferring the expression "good practices", which does not require any ranking between different lessons, rather than claiming that specific evaluation studies, for example of pilot projects, single out best practices. The notion of "best practices" sometimes suggested that there are success stories that could be replicated in unaltered terms in other circumstances. Experience shows that this is not a practical approach to lesson learning.

40. Sometimes lessons learned through evaluations point out weaknesses, pitfalls, problems and generally bad practices which should be avoided in developing and implementing projects and programmes at the country level. These negative lessons

should presumably be communicated and disseminated, as well as success stories. The system and its organizations can learn from both.

41. The decentralization of operational responsibilities to country offices in several organizations of the United Nations system is also generating additional concern for the ability to learn from evaluation at the country level, since country-level offices are often overwhelmed with their new responsibilities and this may limit their ability to assimilate lessons learned. Evaluation results may be reviewed by country-level officers, but not necessarily "learned", unless this assimilation process takes place in the concrete context of specific tasks. Country officers are more likely to learn lessons through evaluations when they are involved in certain assignments that are more conducive to the use of lessons learned, or the search for good practices, and are looking for suggestions how to orient future action. This is the case when they are involved in the development of country strategies or country programmes, or in similarly challenging exercises.

42. Fairly systematic and multi-layered processes have sometimes been developed and implemented for communicating and disseminating evaluation results to the country office, headquarters and global levels. While no organizations claim to have found an ideal system for disseminating evaluation results, many use a mix of the following features:

(a) Country-level workshops, which may include staff of the sponsoring United Nations agency, the host Government, NGOs and civil society organizations, and bilateral and multilateral cooperating agencies, aimed at discussing evaluation results and their application;

(b) Publication of evaluation reports in international languages and in the language of the country concerned;

(c) Development of newsletters, précis and information sheets;

(d) Compilation of annual evaluation reports at the agency level and their incorporation in results-oriented annual reports of the agency or in similar compilations;

(e) Discussion among agency staff of the synthesized results of evaluation activities at annual consultations at the national, regional and headquarters levels;[15]

(f) Posting of lessons learned from evaluation, evaluation reports, synthesis reports and evaluation abstracts on organizational intranets in order to make them easily available at the country office and headquarters levels;

(g) The use of Internet gateways or web sites so that evaluation reports, abstracts and syntheses of lessons learned are made available to the wider global community.[16]

43. For many organizations, the effort to use web-based methods and electronic databases (including distribution of reports, abstracts and lessons learned on CD-ROMs) in order to communicate lessons learned is bound up with the issue of "knowledge management", which often includes "knowledge sharing", the illustration of strategies and processes for communicating and the dissemination of lessons learned from evaluation.

44. This report has not included a review of planned and implemented knowledge management systems in United Nations organizations. It should be noted, however,

that, while many of the responses received from organizations of the system describe knowledge management mainly in terms of the use of modern information technology to construct easily searchable databases and to distribute information through electronic networks and discussion groups, recent management literature describes knowledge management in much broader terms, including ways in which structured information is developed, sustained, communicated and used, and encompassing information on finances, human resources, governance, strategic planning, operations and results. Its most direct application is usually in the realm of information technology but is not limited to that realm.

45. Finally, it is important to note that a number of United Nations organizations play important roles in gathering and disseminating country-specific and global information on progress towards the achievement of development goals.[17] These activities can also be used to disseminate lessons learned from evaluations, together with other relevant information. They involve, for the most part, technical cooperation with developing countries so that they can meet reporting requirements and publish regular updates on national and global progress.

46. As an example, the 2002 UNESCO report, *Education for All — Is the World on Track? EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002*, made use of the conclusions of several evaluations concerned with various national planning processes — UNDAF, the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF), poverty reduction strategy papers and the Education for All (EFA) Plan — and includes a discussion of how these processes may or may not overburden the planning capacities of partner countries and may, or may not, be self-reinforcing or conflicting.

47. On the whole, the way in which United Nations system organizations plan and implement strategies for communicating and disseminating the lessons learned from evaluations at the country and headquarters level is not adequate. While most organizations make some use of the elements listed above (workshops, publications of all types, intranets, extranets, gateways, CD-ROMs, etc.), few have developed a comprehensive and systematic approach to communicating and disseminating the results (including lessons learned) of evaluations.

48. Observations based on information from both headquarters and country-level sources have pointed out:

(a) The lack of sufficient investment in identifying, documenting and synthesizing lessons learned from evaluations;

(b) The tendency for lessons learned to be shared only within specific projects, programmes and organizational units;

(c) The excessive length of time it takes for evaluations to be planned, carried out, reviewed, vetted and revised before the reports are available to be scanned for lessons learned. This time becomes even longer, if the delay in transforming lessons learned into corporate learning is included, with the result that there is a long lag time between the identification of a lesson in a specific study and its entry into the collective information base of the organization concerned.

49. One limitation is that country-level evaluations often do not cover or involve all the active elements of the United Nations system that are relevant for those specific evaluations. This affects the dissemination of their outcomes at the system-wide level. Similarly, the absence of multi-organization evaluations of United

Nations system effectiveness at the country-level suggests that there will be a corresponding absence of lessons learned at that level.

VII. Some proposals for better learning from evaluations

50. Some good practices already in use in different parts of the system have emanated from the consultations so far completed. They suggest the need for:

(i) A strong commitment by senior management to organizational learning and to holding managers accountable for taking lessons learned into account in designing or revising activities;

(ii) Enhancing the independence of the office managing evaluations and producing lessons, as well as giving it adequate resources;

(iii) Recognizing that top priority for a more effective use of lessons learned is the definition of a core group of stakeholders interested in each major evaluation as target audiences and the definition of evaluation products that will be directed to those audiences, including high quality summaries and insights;

(iv) Preparing a management response to each major evaluation, along with monitorable proposals for follow-up;

(v) Systematic organization of a wide dissemination of the evaluation findings and lessons, in accessible summary formats;

(vi) Establishing communities of practice, including through the use of information and communications technology platforms;

(vii) Recognizing that new evaluation tools should be developed to learn lessons in new areas of concern, including greater use of joint evaluations and intelligent use of Internet and intranet facilities;

(viii) Greater and more systematic use of self-evaluation, with the application of appropriate evaluation methods;

(ix) Allocating adequate resources to extracting lessons from evaluations.

51. Some of these suggestions reflect the outcome of field consultations. Box 2, in particular, reproduces a proposal from one member of the country team in China for a permanent national evaluation capacity working towards the twin goals of ongoing programme improvement and strengthening national evaluation capacity through learning by doing.

Box 2

Permanent evaluation: a proposal from UNIDO China

"One of the most effective ways to improve the operations of a given multilateral organization at the country level (in particular one with limited size, financial and human resources) seems to be through the establishment of what could be tentatively called a permanent evaluation/revision process of its operations. ... The final objective is the establishment within any given organization, as an integral part of its operations, of a permanent learning environment, and to avoid reacting only upon the result of a given [and sporadic] evaluation exercise. ... The amount of human resources involved is not small and qualified people cost. However, it seems also possible to explore new [non-conventional] avenues to do the exercises at affordable prices. In this office, the work is being done in cooperation with selected universities, which pay for the major costs of the staff involved. Informal agreements have been reached on an experimental basis and, at the end of three years of operation, a total of approximately 50.0 w/m (working/months) have been provided by young professionals who have just finished their MSc/PhD programmes. All the prospective and continuous revision of operations is being done with the assistance of these staff. It is time consuming, but the results, so far, have been positive and rewarding, at practically no additional cost to the Organization."

VIII. Some concluding observations

52. Evaluation in the United Nations system has multiple goals and lesson learning is recognized by agencies, funds and programmes as being important for each organization. Nevertheless, there has been less attention to, and success in, learning as a system. This hampers the effectiveness of the development support of the United Nations system to developing countries.

53. Lessons learned from evaluations are just one ingredient available at the country level for decision-making about economic and social policy. The level and complexity of knowledge from all sources for making those decisions is increasing so rapidly that it risks overwhelming both national policy makers and United Nations system managers. A strategy which takes account of these factors, both at the level of the system as a whole and of individual United Nations entities, would be helpful.

54. Many organizations in the system have devoted thought and effort to better management of the knowledge coming from their various monitoring and evaluation activities and have provided it to their field-based colleagues. Less thought and energy has been devoted to determining how United Nations country teams can learn collectively from evaluations and making such lessons available to recipient countries in user-oriented form.

55. Given the scarcity of resources for operational activities, conveying useful lessons may be one of the most cost-effective ways in which the United Nations development system can help countries achieve the Millennium Goals and other

similar goals. These lessons are more likely to be useful for that purpose if they are drawn from evaluations that deal with policy issues which countries face in achieving those global goals. Efforts to develop evaluation capacity in the United Nations system should take this into account.

56. The costs and benefits involved in lesson learning from evaluations and, in general, generating different kinds of lessons have not yet been estimated. The trade-off between carrying out evaluations and converting the outcomes of evaluations into useable knowledge needs further analysis to determine priority areas and issues that can most benefit from such emerging knowledge and the best methods to deliver lessons and have them absorbed.

57. A strategic approach by the United Nations system to deciding what benefits lessons learning can bring and where lessons can have the most effect should lead to a more useful and long-lasting application of its unique collective experience at the country level. In that respect, the Millennium Goals and other internationally agreed goals provide a practical starting point for reassessing the demand for and supply of lessons and for determining where lessons would be most useful.

58. Some United Nations system organizations plan to make greater use of participatory methods, especially involving beneficiaries, to design and implement evaluations. These initiatives should be encouraged and monitored systematically to see if they produce lessons that are more readily accepted and acted on at the field level.

59. Different countries have different propensities for learning from evaluation. Country teams should be sensitive to these differences and take full advantage of opportunities for building national capacity through learning by doing. Expanding the country team's support for evaluation capacity development at the national level may be a good way to promote cross-cutting lesson learning and absorption locally.

Recommendations

60. **The Council may wish to:**

(a) **Recommend that the General Assembly consider lessons learned at the country level from evaluation activities as part of the assessment of the overall effectiveness of the operational activities for development of the United Nations system at the next Triennial Comprehensive Policy Review;**

(b) **Recommend that the United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies make systematic efforts to enhance the capacity for identifying, documenting and synthesizing lessons learned from evaluation activities, in order to retain and absorb their results, and to ensure their dissemination at the country level and their use in the design and implementation of programmes and projects;**

(c) **Call upon all organizations of the United Nations system to make additional efforts to promote the development of national evaluation capacities, including capacities to make use of lessons learned from past United Nations activities that are relevant in each national context;**

(d) **Recommend that organizations of the United Nations system assist in national efforts to create country-level repositories of evaluation findings and lessons learned that are relevant in each national context, supporting national**

databases of evaluation lessons learned and the development of analysis, documentation, distillation and synthesis of those lessons learned, and promoting the development of publications and the use of other means of communication;

(e) Call upon relevant United Nations entities to assist national efforts to use information and communications technology to overcome limited access of recipient countries to lessons learned from evaluations, enhancing the countries' use of dissemination devices such as the Internet and other means of information and communication;

(f) Recommend that all organizations of the United Nations system consider lesson learning and dissemination as a specific required component of their annual plans, and identify who will be responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the lesson learning process both at headquarters and at the country level;

(g) Encourage all organizations of the United Nations system undertaking operational activities for development to communicate the findings of evaluation activities and disseminate the corresponding lessons learned to national entities, including through more frequent use of local languages;

(h) Request the organizations of the United Nations system to encourage country teams to make greater use of lessons learned from evaluation in the preparation of the common country assessment, UNDAF and other relevant country documents, and to undertake measures to enhance country-level absorption of lessons learned, including through the intensification of joint activities such as the use of joint programme evaluations, joint mid-term reviews of country programmes under the UNDAF umbrella and joint support to national databases of lessons learned from evaluations.

Notes

[1] A/56/320, para. 60, and A/53/226, para. 29.

[2] A recent evaluation by UNDP of knowledge management issues noted: "From a broader perspective, the level and complexity of knowledge and approach to sharing it has changed considerably over the millennia. While there is much to be said for storytelling and fireside chats, such knowledge-sharing methods don't suffice when the level and complexity of needed knowledge is doubling with each generation. In particular, many new knowledge management technologies and methods have emerged in just the last two years, especially the explosive growth of the Internet." See "Review of the SURF system: way forward for knowledge management in UNDP", report prepared for Evaluation Office, UNDP, New York, July 2000, by Douglas Weidner and M. Shafique Rahman.

[3] The move away from projects towards programmes and from expatriate enclaves towards efforts that are more fully integrated and "owned" by national entities is one example of successful lesson learning by the United Nations system.

[4] "Evaluation, knowledge management, best practices, and high quality lessons learned", by Michael Quinn Patton, *American Journal of Evaluation*, vol. 22, No.3, 2001.

[5] It is worth recalling examples of global lesson learning to which the United Nations system has contributed. Several entities of the system contributed to change the concept of poverty so that it now includes the dimensions of human capabilities and participation. Similarly, the current

attention to institutional issues and the evolution of the concept of capacity-building has benefited from the experience acquired by the United Nations system through development support activities.

[6] The UNDG Task Force on Simplification and Harmonization is currently developing guidelines for the UNDAF Monitoring and Evaluation Plan and the UNDAF Final Evaluations which are expected to foster system-wide collaboration in evaluation activities related to this instrument.

[7] See *A Review of Evaluation in DANIDA*, annex 5, by Hans Lundgren and others, January 2003.

[8] Evidence of this dual approach was provided by a field mission to the Philippines. For example, in a consultation with the management committee of a multi-donor programme for peace and development in the island of Mindanao, the interaction between external evaluation and self-evaluation activities was significant, motivating country-level managers of the programme to generate further demand for external impact evaluation.

[9] There is a certain lack of clarity in the use of the term "participatory evaluation" by a number of United Nations organizations that may refer to it with the intent of involving different entities: field staff or managers, counterpart officers, beneficiaries, other development partners or other stakeholders. It seems unlikely that many agencies are investing for the long duration and in the intensive use of resources required by classical participatory evaluation methods (for an example, see Fetterman, *Empowerment Evaluation: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications, 1996).

[10] The introduction of the UNDAF Results Matrix is a step in the direction indicated by the United Nations funds and programmes of the Executive Committee of UNDG, which decided to harmonize their results-based management terminology.

[11] See paragraph 25 above and footnote 6.

[12] When United Nations organizations do participate, they maintain the operational focus required by their specific mandates but may coordinate their evaluation and monitoring efforts so that they support the common review process. The annual review missions are sector or subsector specific, however, and they do not normally encompass the United Nations system or any subgroup of United Nations agencies in a specific country.

[13] See United Nations, *Capacity-Building Supported by the United Nations — Some Evaluations and Some Lessons*, United Nations, New York, 1999 (United Nations publication, Sales No. 99.II.A.4) and United Nations, *Capacity-Building for Poverty Eradication-Analysis of, and Lessons from Evaluations of UN System Support to Countries' Efforts* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 02.II.A.10).

[14] While headquarters evaluation staff are charged with providing technical support to the field offices, they are most often busy managing programme or thematic evaluations commissioned by their management and governing bodies.

[15] As is the case, for example, with the United Nations Capital Development Fund.

[16] The use of web-based methods of communication and dissemination of lessons learned from evaluation through intranets and extranets represents the single most common feature of recent efforts by United Nations organizations to improve the communication and dissemination of lessons learned from evaluation at all levels.

[17] Just a sample would be: (a) UNDP in assisting countries to prepare national human development reports; (b) UNESCO in assisting countries in compiling national information and in reporting at a global level on progress towards the achievement of Education for All; (c) UNICEF in reporting on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the State of the World's Children; and (d) World Health Organization/Pan American Health Organization in assisting countries in compiling essential health data and reporting on progress on Health for All.